

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Cherokee Farmer Transitions to Organic Production After 35 Years

A strong history of land stewardship and a suite of new conservation practices are helping longtime conventional farmer Gary Otto of rural Cherokee transition about 160 row crop acres to certified organic agriculture.

Otto is one of many Iowa farmers and specialty crop growers who are taking advantage of the 2008 Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Organic Initiative offers already-certified organic producers assistance for applying new conservation practices to treat natural resource concerns, and offers participants transitioning to organic agriculture assistance to protect natural resources while meeting their organic certification goals.

A wheat/alfalfa mix is one of the five rotations in Gary Otto's organic cropping system.



Longtime corn and soybean farmer Gary Otto is utilizing the USDA's Organic Initiative to transition his 160 tillable acres to certified organic production.

Otto conventionally farmed corn and soybeans for 35 years before beginning the organic certification transition process in 2008. He is splitting his 160 acres into five equally-sized fields. In those 30-acre fields he

will annually rotate alfalfa/wheat, alfalfa, corn, soybeans with cover crops, and corn.

Having also worked off the farm for many years, Otto says the desire to farm full-time was a major factor in his decision to transition to organic production. "My farm is too small to make a living farming conventionally," he says. Otto's son, Travis, is also interested in farming. With the extra help he feels more comfortable with the added workload that organic farming brings.

Otto says chemical use – its impact on his family and the environment – was another reason for switching to organic farming. He worked many years for American Natural Soy, Inc., a leader in providing innovative organic processing of oil seeds and flour, in Cherokee. "Mark Schuett who runs the business had a big impact on how I do things on the farm now," says Otto.

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Through the years Otto has implemented sustainable conservation practices such as terraces, field borders, grassed waterways, contour buffer strips and windbreaks to help reduce soil erosion, protect water quality, and attract wildlife. Through the Organic Initiative he is applying pest and nutrient management plans, cover crops, a heavy use protection area, and crop rotations.



Organic soybeans grow up in mid-June through corn residue left from last year's crop.

Since beginning the organic transition process, Otto says he has seen very little erosion. "It's a balancing act between getting rid of weeds and protecting against soil erosion," he says. "I am careful to farm along the contour and leave crop residue wherever possible."

Randy Jipp, soil conservation technician with NRCS in Cherokee County, says Otto has been a willing participant in the Organic Initiative, and eager to learn. "Gary farms with attention to detail," said Jipp. "He does an excellent job controlling weeds, and is an excellent overall land steward."

Otto feels the EQIP Organic Initiative has helped him most in nutrient management planning. "Having to apply strictly organic

inputs for nutrients, it's hard to keep a balance," he says. "It's been a learning experience. The education I've received is worth more than the payment."

He says organic farming can be a little discouraging at times. For example, organic corn prices have dropped steadily since he began transitioning. "At the time we set up our rotation there was a pretty good market for organic corn. Right now, that's not the case," he says.

Nonetheless, Otto is staying positive. He says the camaraderie among organic producers has helped. "I am sticking with it. That's the thing about organic growers – we're willing to share our experiences and information," he says. "It's not like we're competing against one another."

In the future Otto would like to diversify his operation, but for now he is concentrating on getting his equipment and storage ready for the organic system he has in place.

For more information about the EQIP Organic Initiative, contact your NRCS office located at your local county USDA Service Center or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/organic/index.html.

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The Ottos (Gary, Alura, and Travis) stand in a terrace that is helping to reduce soil erosion in the family's new organic system.

